Sailing through the Holidays can be a difficult journey. But add bipolar disorder to the mix, and you may find yourself sailing through stormy waters. Spending some time planning ahead can make the journey smoother and help you develop options when the course gets difficult. Expectations and pace can drive our ship toward rocky shoals or place us in a dead calm. If we internalize the expectations of others or fail to make realistic expectations for ourselves, we can be deeply disappointed. The pace of our daily life is important in helping manage mood. Pacing ourselves through the holidays can help us avoid a too low or too high mood.

Your Map for the “Happiness Expectation”
During the bustle of the holiday season, a clear message is that, no matter what our individual challenges are, we must be “happy.” You need your own map to navigate this rocky shoal. On the one hand, you may be experiencing the symptoms of
depression that make you feel seriously out of step with the happiness expectation.

On the other hand, you may be getting into the happiness mode to the point that you experience the higher moods of bipolar disorder that steer you away from mental wellness.

*Here are ways to draw your own map to manage the happiness expectation:*

• **Consider what your main focus of the season will be.** Do you want a quiet holiday season? Is your family the focus of this time? Are the holidays religious for you? For example, I usually choose a focus of quiet spirituality for the season. For me, this means that I will enjoy a few holiday parties but I will focus on the core message of the holidays, which for me is religious. Your may choose a different focus such as building family relationships, traveling or whatever your personal interests might be.

• **Choose a day early in the holiday season to plan your activities.** Include members of your family and significant others in the planning, and also plan some activities just for yourself. Planning ahead is a great way to map your own expectations and manage the expectations of others. Too many invitations? “I’m sorry but I already have other plans for that day.” Too few invitations during a lonely time of year? Plan to spend specific days of a particular holiday with a friend, as a volunteer, or doing a special activity. In my family, Christmas Day could become a lonely time because our celebration with others is on Christmas Eve. Taking in a movie has become just the thing for us to make the day special.

• **Think of the holidays as a season during which you can take in celebration in small doses.** If all your expectations and focus are on one or two days, those days can sweep you to the high tide of mania or the low tide of depression. Also plan something special for after the holidays so you can look forward to something other than the post holiday season letdown. It can be simple such as going for coffee with a friend in mid-January, but plan it in advance so you know you have something to savor in the days after the holidays.

• **Gift giving is an expectation** for many during the holidays. This activity can fuel buying sprees. It can foster anxiety over which gifts to buy and for whom. If bipolar disorder has taken a toll on your finances, gift giving expectations can become stressful for you.
Here are some suggestions:

i. **Budget and plan your gift giving** to stay within your needs.

ii. **Shop at smaller stores** or different times of the year to avoid buying sprees and the hyper-stimulation of a larger store or mall.

iii. **Buy one or two gifts at a time** instead of trying to do it all at once.

iv. **Make a list** before you go shopping online.

v. **Buy or make a few inexpensive presents** to have on hand for those times when someone gives you a gift you had not expected. (Only make presents if this is easy and fun for you. Don’t buy into the expectation of becoming Martha Stewart.)

vi. **Agree in your family that you will give one main gift and some gag gifts.** If your family is large draw names instead of buying for everyone.

vii. **Instead of a gift to a particular person, give to a non-profit in honor of someone.** The gift can fit your budget and the other person doesn’t have to know the amount of the gift.

As you map out the holidays, ask yourself what additional expectations may need to be considered.

**Pacing as a Compass for the Holiday Season**

To seek mental wellness when you have bipolar disorder, pacing yourself and your activities is extremely important. Pacing helps you avoid the shoals of hyper-stimulation with the fueling of mania and the doldrums of depression.

Here are two ideas to get you started.

- Our schedules can go askew during the holidays and this can lead to unstable mood. **Try to keep your schedule as even as possible** by keeping your wake and sleep time consistent. If you are traveling east or west, you may take a few days prior to and after the trip to gradually work into the new schedule. Allowing an extra day to rest following a trip before going back to work is a great trick if you can manage it. If you are traveling a long distance, ask your doctor about helps to make sure you get adequate sleep.

- Often families or others choose a pace that is not helpful. This happens easily at family gatherings. If family gatherings exhaust, embarrass or stress you, **plan to avoid, mitigate or relieve these stressors.**

Here are some plans to select from ahead of time to keep yourself on pace:

- **Instead of attending the family gathering, send a letter explaining that you had other plans but that you are thinking of those present.**

- **Spend a pre-determined amount of time at the gathering.** When you arrive (or even weeks before to allow time for getting used to the idea) tell your host you will be staying that length of time only.

- **Plan to take a stress break during the gathering.** This may be a time in the kitchen helping with cleanup, a short walk or pulling a (calm) relative aside to a quiet room to talk about something you enjoy together.

- **If you are expecting an embarrassing question from your uncle, plan your answer or action in advance.** You may choose to simply walk away or to deflect the attention away from yourself. Here’s a great phrase I can’t
wait to try, “When did you start thinking of me as being lazy or sick?”

- **Pace is part of our biological rhythms**, and it has plenty to do with mood. Pace the taking of your medications and put into place any reminders you might need during a busy season. Your biological rhythms can be thrown off by street drugs, alcohol and caffeine. Plan to keep yourself out of situations where these are readily available and in which others will try to get you to indulge with them.

  Take your map and compass along whenever you celebrate holidays. Your map will allow you to set reasonable and satisfying expectations. Your compass will help you stay on pace.
  
  Best wishes for smooth sailing!

*Additional articles by Dr. Mountain are available for download from her website, www.BeyondBipolar.com.*

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**Ten Tips for the Holidays**

1. Plan ahead so you know what you want from the holiday season.
2. Learn to say, “No,” to activities that will have an adverse affect on your health.
3. Plan the amount of time you wish to spend with relatives and friends.
4. Learn to give simple gifts that are treasured instead of big ones that bust your budget.
5. Spread out your holiday so a single day isn’t pressure-filled.
6. Decide ahead of time what you wish to tell relatives and friends about your past year’s activities.
7. Schedule rest during the holiday season.
8. If you have felt left out in the past, plan your own activity so you aren’t sitting alone at home, unless it is your choice to do so.
9. Shop at thrift stores if your budget is small.
10. Celebrate your faith if you would like that to be the center of your holiday.
Rough Sailing during the Holidays

Jane Mountain MD

Bipolar disorder seriously affects families as well as individuals and it has potential to cause rough sailing during the holidays. As a family member or friend of someone with bipolar disorder, it can be helpful to spend some time considering the impact of the holidays on a family dealing with bipolar disorder. Some of the most challenging issues in families dealing with bipolar disorder during the holidays are those of disclosure, embarrassment and guilt. Let’s take each of these separately and see how they might play out during the holiday season. Then I’d like to make a few suggestions for parents of children and adolescents who have bipolar disorder.

Disclosure

Often the major holiday activities revolve around gatherings with extended family. During these gatherings there can be great pressure to “catch up” on what has happened since the last family gathering. When the “catch up” involves the person with bipolar disorder, the inner pressure to disclose the illness to others may be intense. Much of the family’s energy has been taken up with addressing bipolar disorder, and it is hard to get beyond thinking about their struggles.

The simple fact is that we never have to disclose to everyone what we have been challenged with. In some cases where family members have no way of processing this information or an understanding of how they can react supportively, disclosure can become an experience that will not be positive. If the person or persons in the family who have bipolar disorder have chosen not to disclose a diagnosis, you may betray their trust if you “catch up” with family members by talking about it. If disclosure has already occurred, your “catch up” should not focus around an illness. At a family gathering we can chose to make our “catch up” around positive events. Remember, none of us want to be thought of as an illness. Too often it is heard that someone “is bipolar”. If a family member had cancer, we would never say that person is a “cancer.” Likewise, a person cannot “be bipolar” but rather has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Your “catch up” is about the person who has bipolar disorder, not the illness experience.

Embarrassment

It’s especially difficult when conversations focus on a sibling or cousin of the person with bipolar disorder, recounting all of that person’s accomplishments and then brushing over what may have been a much more challenging year for the person with bipolar disorder. If bipolar disorder has caused any kind of disability, if the person with bipolar disorder is having difficulty with work or school, think ahead of the positives you can emphasize instead of allowing a void in which the person with bipolar disorder becomes a non-person.

In my work I meet or correspond with a large number of people with bipolar disorder as well as other psychiatric illnesses. One thing I have noticed is the courage they express in facing daily life. If John has bipolar disorder, you may
be able to comment like this, “John has had a challenging year, but I see his courage growing steadily. Or how about, “Anita has been a dear niece to me during the past few months and I enjoy her friendly visits so much.” We can focus on qualities rather accomplishments when that is appropriate. Embarrassment about a person’s illness is inappropriate but it happens. No one chooses to have bipolar disorder either individually or as a family. It is a serious illness that is, for the most part, socially and culturally not understood or accepted. If you are embarrassed about facing this challenge, learn more about bipolar disorder and get the help you need.

Guilt
The holiday season is an opportune time to get stuck in a process of guilt. We tend to sum up our lives at the end-of-the-year mark. Your personal or family life may not have been what you expected this past year. The challenge of bipolar disorder may have played a role in your feelings. Many family members, especially parents, feel guilt that they passed on the genetic makeup that was a factor in their child’s illness. Other family members can experience guilt over not dealing with the situation “well enough”. A lot of pressure is put on family members to handle crises and day to day living with bipolar disorder. Almost never is there any education provided about how to do this.

Bipolar disorder runs in families and affects them significantly. The resiliency we need in our communities is seldom present. Often the most essential treatment resources are lacking. This is not your fault. You are doing the best you can with the resources you have available. Have the grace to forgive yourself so you can move on. If you don’t have the grace to forgive, ask for it, since grace always comes as a gift.

I’d like to end with a few suggestions for parents of young people with bipolar disorder. Some of these may help parents of adults as well.

• Hyper-stimulation around holidays is difficult for children with bipolar disorder. Those of us who have this illness have brains that are not able to filter out stimuli in our environment. Keeping the noise and visual stimuli down a notch or two can help avoid a melt down. A quiet break with someone the child enjoys in a separate room can be a mood-saver during a family gathering.

• Siblings of children with bipolar disorder can feel left out when parents are daily making accommodations for a child with bipolar disorder. Perhaps it is their turn for accommodation. Don’t try to make up for this with more presents but with more of your presence.

• If possible, create a holiday tradition of spending a special time with each child. If you can’t manage this alone, perhaps a close relative or friend can help you out with the preparations or by caring for your other children. It doesn’t have to be fancy; it just has to be your presence and undivided attention for that child alone.

• Take care of yourself first. Do something alone or with someone you love that takes you out of the pressures of being a parent of a child with special needs.

• One thing to consider is the disruption the holidays have on daily routines. Disruption of routine can be a challenge that destabilizes mood for the child or adolescent with bipolar disorder. Look for a balance where the child can decide on limiting some activities in order to feel better.